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Book Review - Gretchen McCulloch, *Because Internet: Understanding the New Rules of Language* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2019)

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Gretchen McCulloch, *Because Internet: Understanding the New Rules of Language* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2019).

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Years ago, I made a random observation. Every time my husband “laughed” in a text or chat message to me, he’d write, “heh.” All lowercase, always without punctuation. The styling felt so suitable for his personality – amused, perhaps just a bit humoring, and understated. I am more likely to write, “Ha!” Always capitalized, almost always with an exclamation mark. This suited me, too, being a bit brighter, and overtly enthusiastic. Our brief discussion of these differences, and why we were drawn to our particular stylings, led to an unexpectedly engaging social media thread where I asked my friends and colleagues about their own “digital laughs.” We collectively sussed out the differences between a “LOL!” a “hehehe,” and a “lmo.”

Linguist Gretchen McCulloch’s recent book, *Because Internet: Understanding the New Rules of Language*, serves as a longer, better researched, and far more nuanced version of that conversation. Accessibly written and bubbling with curiosity that comes from a scholar who clearly adores her field, *Because Internet* takes both a micro and macro look at how digital technology has affected the natural evolution of language and modern patterns of communication and conversation.

At the micro level, McCulloch digs down to an at times letter-by-letter examination of modern writing in text messaging, social media posts, and various other forms of digital communication. McCulloch is gifted with the ability to draw out the everyday patterns and practices that a person may have casually observed and occasionally enacted, but perhaps never named or critically analyzed. She demonstrates the versatility of all caps as a

styling choice, how it can CONVEY FRUSTRATION, yet also magnify positive emotions (as in, YOU GOT THIS!). She digs into the whys and hows of the “expressive extension” of words, as in “ughhhhhhh,” or “yaaaaaay” (admittedly, a personal favorite of mine). She considers how the exclamation mark has evolved to express not only excitement, but also warmth. She illuminates the emotional nuances between the decision to punctuate one’s words with ~sparkly tildes~ instead of ***repetitive asterisks*** and highlights a variety of other `_s t y l e c h o i c e s_` made possible by using **oNly ThE KeYBoARd**. In an illuminating chapter on emoji practices, she helped me realize I’m not alone in my tendency to leave emoji replies in clusters of three (😊😊😊).

These communication choices aren’t the product of laziness or a user’s lack of grammatical rules. Rather, McCulloch explains that these decisions stem from

a desire to imbue our digital writing with personalization, emotion, and interaction. She writes, “keyboards took away some of our previous repertoire for expressive writing, like multiple underlines, colored ink, fancy borders, silly doodles, and even subtle changes in someone’s handwriting that might allow you to infer their mood... expressive typography makes electronic communication anything but impersonal” (153).

At other times, *Because Internet* takes a macro historical perspective, showcasing the breadth of McCulloch’s knowledge via quirky anecdotes from early linguistic studies in Europe, the sprinkling in of references to non-English language evolution and stories of ancient linguistic practices. She traces today’s emoji to earlier examples of “written gesture,” including printed ASCII art, classic emoticons such as =) and kaomoji like the ever-popular “shruggy”: _(ツ)_/. She discusses the visual evolution of chat technology to explain how we arrived at today’s most common chatting interface: the endless vertically scrolling chat screen. McCulloch also outlines a thought-provoking framework that divides users into groups of “internet people” based on when and how they first used the internet and/or digital technology, which had me nodding in agreement and attempting to categorize all my acquaintances.

Importantly, McCulloch resists the urge to sugarcoat the past. She acknowledges the political, religious, and socioeconomic factors that led to the dominance of the Proper English™ we still so often expect of writers today. (And yes, she discusses the use of ironic trademark symbols as a typographical strategy.) The book has a refreshing lack of grammatical finger wagging; she describes “standard” language and “correct” spelling as “collective agreements, not eternal truths,” and comes across as truly delighted by how and why those “collective agreements”

about language change and evolve (46). She also urges her readers to avoid the tendency to romanticize communication practices of days past, articulating the clear historical precedent for moral panics and social disruptions surrounding new communication technologies and practices (Did you know that “hello” was controversial when it first emerged as a favored telephone greeting?).

Because Internet

Understanding the New Rules of Language

Gretchen McCulloch

Because Internet is a book that will help you catch up, or perhaps keep up, with what McCulloch describes as “natural linguistic evolution” in the digital era. With her observations as a guide, you’ll have an easier time making sense of the memes, type treatments, emojis, gifs, and acronyms you stumble upon online. Interspersed with observations of classic memes such as Doge and Philosoraptor, McCulloch also introduces linguistic concepts such as phatic expression, diglossia, and familects in understandable ways, and keeps a close eye on how geography, gender, genre, class, and relationships shape our digital communication practices. She also acknowledges the limitations of technology within these contexts, such as how many translation services are still

incapable of conveying the emotional nuances of the digital communication described throughout her book (and remain heavily biased toward a particular version of the English language).

One area I’d argue merits a deeper analytical dive would be the intersection of race and digital linguistics. McCulloch does briefly acknowledge some problematic practices in this arena, including the concept of digital blackface in gif reactions, as well as how the dialects of certain demographics can get co-opted by others online; however, the book would have benefited from a deeper exploration of race in her discussion of emoji, as well as the politics of specific language choices in public digital spaces, particular for people of color.

All told, however, the book serves as more than a tool to better understand your own typographical texting quirks. I also interpret it as a challenge to check our biases and reframe our attitudes regarding the national evolution of language, which McCulloch describes as “humanity’s most spectacular open source project” (267). It’s not just that McCulloch is *tolerant* of these often youth-led changes to language that regularly ruffle stringent grammarians’ feathers; she’s actually an enthusiastic *advocate* for them and frowns upon any interpretation of language that is static, inflexible, and stuck in a particular time or culture. She explains, “I get a joyful thrill every time I zoom out on the English language and realize that we’re somewhere in the middle of its story, not at the beginning or end” (47). I loved the generosity of the notion that young people, like the many we work with here at BSU, are at the helm of this linguistic evolution, and that by learning more about how they digitally express themselves, we can better understand them.

That being said, we don’t yet live in the utopian society that McCulloch imagines, one where no one cares about “correct” grammar, and we all put our

brains to better use “than upholding the prejudices of a bunch of aristocrats from the eighteenth century” (49). Part of me cheers this rebellious vision, and yet my communication studies students are training for very specific careers as writers, journalists, and public relations professionals. More likely than not, they will find themselves working in professional environments that still uphold very particular grammar and language systems. While *Because Internet* may offer insights into how these students text with their friends or post in their Finsta accounts on Instagram, it doesn’t mean that they are relieved of the work of learning and mastering the Proper English™ that still reigns supreme in so much of our professional world.

But even when formality is still required in many parts of our communication, that doesn’t mean it has to rule over our every interaction, and in the end, I value the space that the author left open to appreciate digital writing practices for their uniqueness and creativity. Communication is a spectrum, and there’s room for many types of expression. As McCulloch writes, “Many areas of our lives, like clothing styles and eating styles, run the full gamut from formal to informal with many gradations in between. How marvelous it is that writing styles can do the same!” (195). I might even go so far as to describe it as
~m a r v e l o u s ~. 🥰



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